

CHAPTER 2

THE LADY OF THE LAMP

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE was born on May 12th, 1820, and was thus one year younger than Queen Victoria. She was the second of the two children, both daughters, of Mr. William Nightingale, a man of considerable wealth and culture, with enough spare time on his hands to supervise and even conduct the education of his daughters. (Florence read Homer with him when she was sixteen!) From her earliest days she took life with immense seriousness. Balls, parties, and social junketings in general simply bored her (though she was intensely interested in music, especially opera). For company she preferred the society of intelligent men, with whom she could discuss the social and political problems of the day. So far as her own sex was concerned, she had no lack of friends, but she took little interest in their romantic adventures or whispered confidences. Not that she was dull or unsociable: though seriously disposed she possessed a keen sense of humour, and in conversation could hold her own with the most vivacious. She is even said to have been an excellent mimic.

But though she eschewed frivolity and the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, Florence was by no means wasting her youth. In point of fact she was preparing herself, from her earliest years, more or less unconsciously at first, for her appointed destiny. She longed for something to *do*—something continuous and constructive—and to do it for other people. For that reason her aimless and artificial existence, as she regarded it, was a constant reproach to her conscience.

Quite in her early childhood she developed a passion for sick-nursing. It is even recorded that she used to nurse and bandage

dolls which had suffered damage through the exuberance of her elder sister. Her first essay in the rendering of first-aid was in setting the broken leg of a shepherd's collie, which she found lying out on the downs near Embley.

But all this time she was merely feeling her way. Her own purpose was not yet made plain to her; the clear pattern of her mission in life had not yet emerged from the realm of dreams. Like Francis of Assisi and Jeanne d'Arc before her, she was waiting for her Call.

Then, quite suddenly, on February 7th, 1837, when she was seventeen, it came. On that date, as Florence herself announces in an autobiographical fragment, God called her to His Service. At the outset she was merely conscious of the Call itself; as yet she had no knowledge as to whither it was to lead her. But for the next three months, she tells us, she 'worked very hard among the poor people, under a strong feeling of religion'.

She was anxious to be a dutiful daughter, and struggled hard in the months and years which followed to persuade herself that her place was in her home; but in vain. Her sense of vocation was too strong. Her growing ambition all this time was to devote herself to nursing, and she told her parents so. But here she met with no encouragement; indeed her mother, a deeply pious and inflexibly narrow-minded lady, was frankly horrified, and her easy-going father acquiesced in his spouse's verdict.

Florence, herself, never ceased hoping and planning. She was older now, and completely sure of herself. And in due course, through the good offices of Doctor (afterwards Cardinal) Manning, whom she had met in Rome some years previously, she was permitted to undergo a course of training in a Nursing Sisterhood in Paris, and thus launch herself permanently on her true life's work. Her status here was that of a *postulante*; in this capacity she pledged herself, under the direction of the Sisters, to render service to the sick in the hospitals and assist in the education (including the games) of the small inmates of the orphanage. She was doing something useful, and constructive at last. Moreover, she now had to make her own decisions, and with her well-ordered brain and card-index memory, was

learning to make them not only correctly but quickly. What was more, she was unconsciously preparing herself for the time when it would be her duty to impose those decisions, sometimes willy-nilly, upon other people.

II

It is now time to introduce into our story a character whose name will be for ever coupled with Miss Nightingale's, firstly in the matter of a joint and successful crusade for the amelioration of hospital conditions in the Crimea; and subsequently in a prolonged campaign, instigated very largely by Miss Nightingale herself, for Army reform all round.

This was Sidney Herbert, who in 1854 occupied the post of Secretary of State at War. Technically, the Secretary of State at War had nothing whatever to do with War, his official duties being confined to finance and accounting. But Sidney Herbert was not the man to be tied down by routine. He was determined that women nurses should be sent to Scutari—Russell's dispatches in *The Times* had convinced him of that—and his determination was strengthened by the circumstance that he had in mind the exact person to appoint as organizer and leader of such an expedition—Miss Florence Nightingale, no less.

He and his wife had met Miss Nightingale in Rome during a continental tour some seven years previously, and the trio had become firm friends. Indeed, it was not long before Mr. Herbert and Miss Nightingale discovered in one another kindred spirits of an identical pattern. Florence was well aware that this charming and talented man had already devoted many years of his life to the welfare of the poor in general and the soldier in particular; while her own life so far had been one long preparation for participation in exactly similar work—a fact that Herbert himself was not slow to observe and recognize. It was deep calling to deep: no wonder they became friends.

Nor was it altogether surprising either, that when in October 1854 Sidney Herbert had read Russell's flaming dispatch and decided to answer its call, the first name which occurred to him

for his female Chief of Staff should be that of the girl, that realistic dreamer, whom he and his wife had met in Rome.

He promptly sat down and wrote her a letter, in which he invited her to undertake the immense responsibilities of such a task.

The letter was crossed by one from Florence Nightingale (addressed with becoming modesty to Mrs. Herbert) offering her services.

III

Upon Saturday, October 21st, 1854, Miss Nightingale, accompanied by a party of thirty-eight nurses (and punctiliously chaperoned by her uncle, Samuel Smith, as far as Marseilles) left London for the Crimea. Only ten days had elapsed since her acceptance of Sidney Herbert's invitation—or rather appeal—days of breathless activity and preparation, in which Miss Nightingale impressed all about her with her clear-headedness and monumental calm.

In the formal letter confirming her appointment, Sidney Herbert had summarized her duties and explained, in terms of the utmost clarity, what her relations would (or should) be with the authorities both at home and overseas.

In this thoughtful and comprehensive document, whose author was obviously determined to make everything as smooth for his protégée as possible, two points stand out conspicuously. Firstly, Miss Nightingale was to have supreme and undivided control of her own nurses. She had stipulated for that throughout, and the Secretary of State at War had seen to it that she should have her way. Secondly, she was not to be hampered by lack of funds. In point of fact she was even better off in this respect than would appear. Her own services she gave gratuitously, which meant that the allowance of £500 a year which she received from her father was available for the comfort and welfare of her patients. *The Times* fund, already mentioned, was also at her disposal, and she received many additional and unsolicited contributions from private individuals—some of

them friends, many total strangers—amounting to about £7,000 in all.

She had agreed with Sidney Herbert that her first nursing contingent should be limited in number to forty; but even for such a modest establishment as this it was by no means easy to obtain sufficient recruits of the right type—that is to say, women with some experience of nursing and, above all, the necessary spirit of devotion to a high calling. Many of the applicants proved to be completely irresponsible both in character and point of view.

I wish [wrote one of Miss Nightingale's assistants] that people who may hereafter complain of the women selected, could have seen the set we had to choose from. All London was scoured for them. . . . We felt ashamed to have in the house such women as came. One alone expressed a wish to go from a good motive. Money was the only inducement.

This revelation seems effectually to dispose of the legend that Miss Nightingale's Crimean nurses were English ladies of birth and breeding, universally inspired by devotion to a noble ideal. Taking them all round, they were a rough and ready lot, and, as we shall see, it was entirely due to their Superintendent's wise direction and strict discipline that they developed their subsequent amenability and efficiency.

IV

Scutari lay on the Asiatic side of the narrow Bosphorus, immediately opposite Constantinople, and housed the four principal hospitals of the British Army. The two with which we are chiefly concerned were the General Hospital, originally designed as such by the Turkish Government, and 'so was reduced to good order early,' Miss Nightingale reports, 'by the unwearied efforts of the first-class Staff Surgeon. It was then maintained in excellent condition until the end of the War'. It

housed 1,000 patients, but the Battle of the Alma made it clear that much more accommodation would be required.

A second building had therefore been taken over. This had been designed not as a hospital at all, but as a barracks, and proved unsuitable from every point of view.

As for the conditions prevailing among the sick and wounded lying there, it became immediately apparent that Russell's report in *The Times* was no exaggeration: if anything, it was an understatement.

The inefficiency of the transport service was a menace in itself. The distance across the Black Sea from Balaclava to Scutari was about three hundred miles—about as far as a coastal trip from the Thames to the Tyne. But the ships containing the sick and wounded took eight and a half days, sometimes longer, to cover the distance. After the Alma battle seventy per thousand of them died *en route*, mainly through sheer lack of attention.

But the climax of horror was reached with the description of conditions in the Barrack Hospital itself. This imposing building acclaimed by its selectors as ideal for its purpose, was a pest-house and nothing more.

Underneath the great structures [the Roebuck Committee were informed] were sewers of the worst possible construction, loaded with filth—mere cesspools in fact—through which the wind blew sewer-air up the pipes of numerous open privies into the corridors and wards where the sick were lying. There was also frightful overcrowding. For many months the space for each patient was one-fourth of what it ought to have been.

No wonder, for at one time no less than 2,434 patients were crowded into this particular hospital. Consequently, what with wounds, frostbite, emaciation and dysentery, cholera and typhus were rife. In February 1855 the mortality in the Barrack Hospital reached the appalling total of 42 per cent of the cases treated.

But the medical authorities, especially some of the senior

officers, were far from co-operative. They were all for established tradition. They declared bluntly that what had been good enough for them, under Wellington in the Peninsula, was good enough for Raglan's men in the Crimea; adding, by implication, that it was a thousand pities that a pack of interfering women should have been sent out by Mr. Herbert to undermine the natural courage and fortitude of the British soldier by unnecessary coddling. But the main source of the trouble lay elsewhere. It arose entirely from absence of co-operation and lack of personal initiative. Miss Nightingale herself summed it all up in one brief, pungent sentence:

The root of the evils which have to be dealt with is
division of responsibility and reluctance to assume it.

V

These two evils Miss Nightingale now set out to remedy. She was determined that divided control should be done away with, and in so far as the need for initiative was concerned, to bring the full weight of what Dean Stanley once described as her 'commanding genius'—in other words, her genius for command—to bear upon the tangled situation.

And she was, whether she knew it or not, to go far beyond that. The successful reorganization of the medical services in the Crimean War was not to be the end of her task; it was merely the beginning, as the subsequent history of the British Army, at least up to the death of Sidney Herbert, attests.

But this is to anticipate. The work immediately to her hand lay in the wards of the Scutari hospitals. She set about it in three ways. Firstly, she applied an expert's touch and a woman's insight to a hospital hitherto managed exclusively by men. Secondly, she boldly assumed responsibility—which means that if she could find no one to do a thing she did it herself. Thirdly, she relegated the role of ministering angel to a secondary position, and converted herself into a propagandist of the most persistent

and ruthless description, bombarding the authorities at home with suggestions, exhortations, reproaches, and what are known in these days as 'pep talks', all upon the subject of the reform of the medical services in the Crimea.

Meanwhile, the first requisite was to make good some glaring deficiencies in hospital supplies and equipment. Her patients must at least have such elementary comforts as soap and towels, knives and forks, combs and toothbrushes. A certain supply of these she already had in hand, since she had expended a large sum of her own money, when passing through Marseilles, upon the purchase of those necessities which feminine instinct had warned her would probably be none too plentiful in a man-managed hospital.

But these, she knew, could only serve as a stop-gap until she was in a position to tap official resources, which she had good cause to know were abundant, if only she could obtain access to them. Here, she felt sure, there would be formalities to overcome, including a good deal of procrastination and possibly some deliberate obstruction. And she was right. But she possessed in a high degree the gift of knowing where to put her hand on things which she wanted, and no scruples about beating down or, if need be, circumventing official opposition to her requirements.

So, with the growth of her own experience and authority, Miss Nightingale soon developed the technique necessary to deal with such hindrances to action—'bottlenecks' is the modern term—as these. The next time a consignment of clothing arrived from home she ordered it to be 'forcibly' opened; and it was—with the Purveyor, who was nominally responsible for its custody and issue, standing by 'wringing his hands in departmental agony'.

In other words, 'the Bird', as she was sometimes irreverently called behind her back, was by this time a law unto herself.

It is interesting to note that in the ceaseless arguments in which she found herself constantly involved she never fussed or lost her temper. We are told that she was never known to raise her voice upon these occasions: she achieved her ends by quiet determination and sheer force of character. She seldom took no for

an answer. When told that a thing could not be done, she simply replied 'It must be done': and as a rule it was done.

Still, in the midst of all the turmoil and distraction, Florence Nightingale could maintain her sense of balance, and above all, her sense of humour. Here, in a letter home, is a lively description of an argument between our Lady Superintendent and a member of her corps of Ministering Angels, one Mrs. Lawfield, upon the subject of hospital caps. It is headed 'Speech of Mrs. Lawfield':

I came out, ma'am, prepared to submit to everything, to be put upon in every way. But there are some things, ma'am, one can't submit to. There is Caps, ma'am, that suits one face, and some that suits another. And if I'd known, ma'am, about the Caps, great as was my desire to come out to nurse at Scutari, I wouldn't have come, ma'am!

Miss Nightingale in due course contrived to do something even about the Caps.

VI

The incident of the redoubtable Mrs. Lawfield and the caps brings us to the question, always interesting to the nursing profession, of uniform in general.

The uniform of Miss Nightingale's original thirty-eight nurses was devised, naturally, more or less on the spur of the moment. They wore grey tweed wrappers, worsted jackets, with caps and short woollen cloaks, and a 'frightful scarf' of brown holland, embroidered in red with the words 'Scutari Hospitals'. Even the Roman Catholic Sisters wore these, abandoning their own religious habit.

The short woollen cloak at least should be remembered with honour, for it was destined to serve as the model for the scarlet cape worn today by the ladies of Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps, and as such may be regarded as a bright memorial to the foundress of military nursing.

The 'frightful scarf', moreover, was not without its uses. Some such distinctive badge was a valuable safeguard amid the very mixed society of a base camp. The soldiers came to recognize and respect the Hospital uniform. 'A raw newcomer', we are told, was seen to accost one of the nurses in the street. 'You leave her alone,' said his mate: 'don't you know she's one of Miss Nightingale's women?'

The maintenance of discipline among the nurses themselves, as we have seen, was always a matter of difficulty, especially at the beginning. An even greater problem was that of the adequate training of a young woman with no real liking or aptitude for the calling of a nurse. Of the thirty-eight who constituted her original following Miss Nightingale considered that not more than sixteen were really efficient, though of these she classed some three or four in the very highest category. However, by judicious distribution of the stronger vessels among the weak, a general average of efficiency was successfully maintained.

Miss Nightingale's sumptuary laws, as might have been expected from their author, were both comprehensive and precise. Nurses were required at all times to appear in regulation dress, with the badge, and never to wear flowers in their bonnet-caps, or ribbons, other than such as were provided for them or sanctioned by the Superintendent. A second rule defined the exact quantity of spirituous refreshment of which a nurse might partake in a day—a reminder that the Mrs. Gamp era was not long over—while a third laid down that 'no nurse will be allowed to walk out except with the housekeeper, or with a party of at least three nurses together'.

VII

In due course Miss Nightingale found time to embark upon a tour of inspection of the hospitals in the Crimea itself. There were four General Hospitals in the Crimea, of which the General Hospital at Balaclava and the 'Castle Hospital', situated on the 'Genoese Heights' above, were the most important. Both of

these by this time employed a number of female nurses under their own superintendents, and Miss Nightingale was naturally anxious to inspect these and bring them up, if need be, to the Scutari level of cleanliness and efficiency.

But she herself was already heading for a breakdown, and little wonder; for she had been labouring from morning till night, and frequently through the night, under the double strain of personal responsibility and physical effort, for many months. During her tour of the Crimea, she spent whole days either in the saddle or a rough baggage-cart, visiting hospitals, outlying batteries, and front-line trenches, where the troops' cheerful endurance of appalling conditions made a profound and lasting impression upon her. She was, as usual, fearless of contagion, and personally tended patients stricken with cholera or fever.

But the pitcher had gone to the well once too often, and Florence Nightingale was herself laid low by 'Crimean' fever. For some days, as she afterwards admitted, she lay very near death.

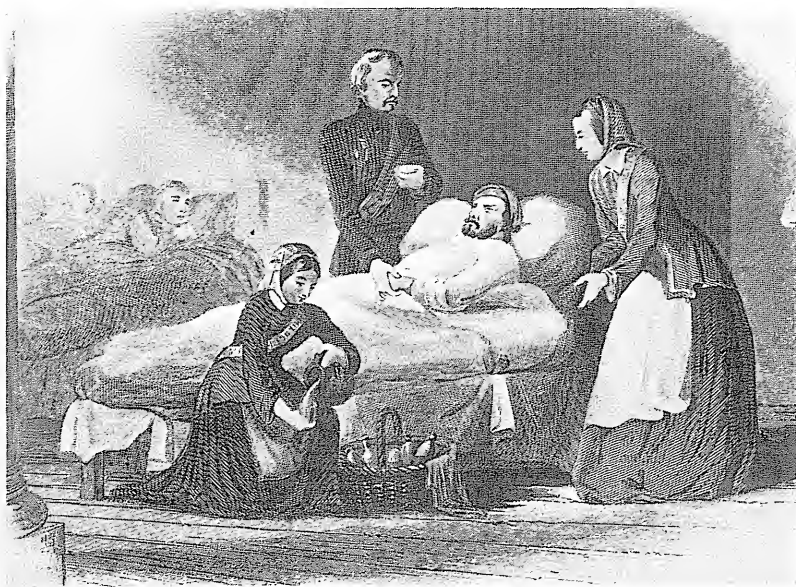
The news was received with consternation everywhere, not only by her friends at home but throughout England. Queen Victoria made frequent and anxious inquiry. In the hospitals of the Crimea, we are told, soldiers turned their faces to the wall and wept. But at last, after days and nights of suspense, the crisis passed, and the beloved patient was pronounced out of danger.

VIII

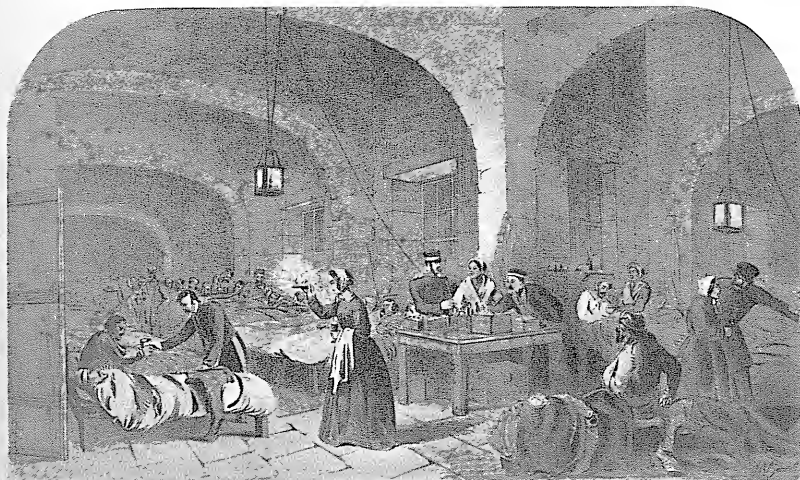
Let us now survey the scene as it presents itself in May, 1856.

A complete transformation has been effected. The muddle and confusion in the wards have disappeared. Order and cleanliness reign; hospital supplies are regular and abundant, and the sanitation has been completely overhauled. Most significant sign of all, the rate of mortality among the sick and wounded has fallen 42 per cent to 22 per thousand.

This miracle had been achieved in the first place by Miss Nightingale's rigid insistence on absolute cleanliness everywhere.



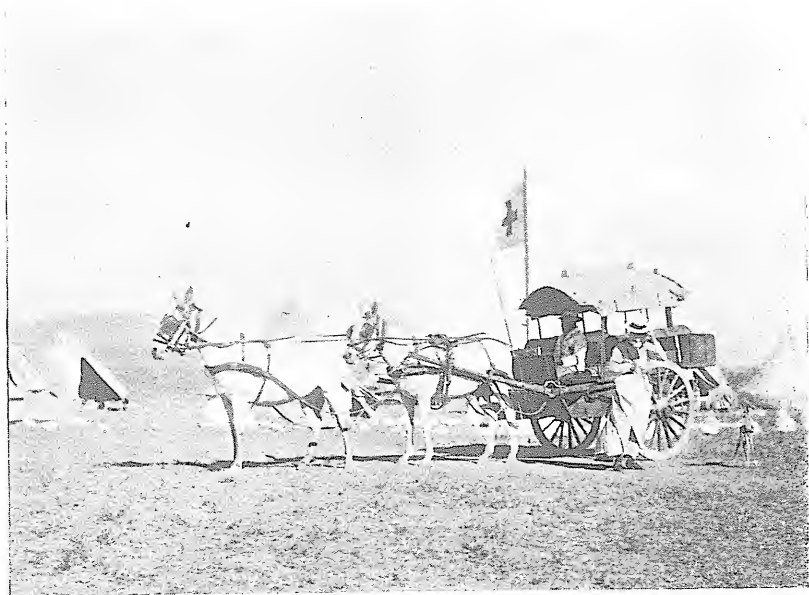
Florence Nightingale nursing during the Crimean War (By courtesy of Picture Post)



FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE IN THE MILITARY HOSPITAL AT SCUTARI.

Scutari, where the wounded soldiers were brought, and where the British nurses were stationed.

The night round at Scutari



The South African War. A Sister and her mule cart



Sisters of Princess Christian's Nursing Reserve in South Africa

Antiseptics were as yet unknown, but there is a good deal of virtue in ordinary soap-and-water. *Sanitas Sanitatum—Omnia Sanitas!* was her guiding principle from the outset, and continued long after the Crimean War, when it was no longer her aim to heal the wounds of war but to maintain soldiers in health in time of peace. She had never forgotten that in the pre-war era the military mortality rate had been double that of the civil population.

Another and even more important reform was in the matter of hospital food—and not merely of the food but the manner in which it was cooked. Here she simply brought to her task the ordinary competence and care of a good housewife, though on a vastly magnified scale; for the beds in the Barrack Hospital extended over a distance of four miles, including the corridors, and it took nearly four hours to serve the men's dinner.

This meal, needless to say, was singularly unsuited to patients suffering from high fever or recent amputations. Miss Nightingale therefore set about making special provision for the more serious cases. Within ten days of her arrival she had opened two 'extra diet' kitchens in separate parts of the building, and had three supplementary boilers installed for the preparation of arrow-root and other easily digestible foods. As usual, when the Government stores failed, she met the requisitions of the hospital surgeons from her own private resources.

In 1855 she received an invaluable recruit and collaborator in the famous Frenchman, M. Soyer, formerly *chef* of the Reform Club in London. He threw himself into the work with a will, adapting and more than once improving upon Miss Nightingale's culinary arrangements. Incidentally he invented the Soyer stove, a field-cooking device of great simplicity and the utmost value. It was still being used by the British Expeditionary Force in 1939.

Soyer also accompanied Miss Nightingale to the Crimea, where he proved himself invaluable in devising improvements in the hospital catering arrangements. We shall hear of him again in a post-war capacity.

By mid-1856, then, the machine which Miss Nightingale had built up with such vision and determination was functioning

normally, and for the first time in the history of the British Army its Nursing Services had been stabilized. But the strain upon the organizer of the miracle was grievous indeed, and would have been quite intolerable in the case of a lesser woman.

At the end of each day, as a matter of regular routine after the completion of her always heavy correspondence, Miss Nightingale made her final, solitary round of the wards through four miles of beds.

That scene has often been described and depicted. A dim light burned here and there; she herself carried a hospital lantern, which she set down whenever she paused to lean over and soothe some restless patient. To others she would nod and smile as she passed, while they in their turn kissed her shadow as it fell upon the whitewashed wall.

This was a very different Miss Nightingale from the unbending autocrat whom Authority knew, capable of employing every device, legitimate or otherwise, to override resistance to her demands and get things done which she had made up her mind must be done. But to the maimed, suffering men who lay in serried ranks, a few inches apart, along those silent, darkened passages, she was the Lady of the Lamp, and an Angel from Heaven.